

The Power of Welcoming Angry Young Men

UK charity **abandofbrothers** has been supporting vulnerable young men since 2006. At a weekly meeting, **Dave Bevan** witnesses one man's anger transform into a powerful moment of connection

Even though we support young men who have either been in prison or are at risk of ending up there, our weekly **abandofbrothers** (ABOB) meeting is usually the most harmonious place I know. Tonight, however, it is kicking off.

One of the young lads (let's call him Tyler) has arrived boiling over with incoherent anger, and is close to becoming threatening. It is a turning point, with two of this society's well-worn paths as possibilities emerging before us. Will he be shamed and shunned, making this just one more place where he doesn't feel welcome? Or will he intimidate others into letting his aggression dominate the space without repercussions?

In ABOB, we choose neither. Kindly but firmly, one of the older men walks outside with Tyler to let him blow off some steam and return calmer. Meanwhile, I say to the rest of the group what turns out to be the magic words: 'This is the work'.

Because it is – this is what we are here for. We are here to hold the boundaries, but also to let Tyler know that he is welcome even when he is messy, because we can hold it.

And so, a few minutes later, Tyler returns, and he is lovingly welcomed back, boundaries made clear. He asks to speak first in that evening's sharing circle, and apologises for his behaviour. After venting his anger more calmly, he speaks to the despair beneath it: being stuck at home with a dysfunctional family, repeatedly turned down for jobs, no hope, no future, just recurrent thoughts of suicide.

It was like the moment when the sky cracks open into a thunderstorm, but somehow reversed. The storm which had rocked the circle resolved itself into something new and deep and precious. The next two young men shared, and, hearts opened by compassion, they spoke of their own despair, and their own suicidality.

And so it continued around the circle, as men young and old spoke of

their share in that particular burden: those who cover their despair with machismo; those who direct their aggression inwards. Those who, like me, had experienced suicidal ideation in their youth, and could speak to the process of rebuilding a fulfilling life from such apparent ruins. We saw each other that night, and we had Tyler to thank for it.

OPENING A CONVERSATION WITH ANGER

Looking back, what sticks with me most is how easy it would have been to be just a little less welcoming, and how much could have been lost if we had.

I understand that many groups or institutions simply do not have the capacity to welcome anger, and it may be necessary for the safety and wellbeing of the whole to exclude an individual. ABOB works with the criminal justice system, and I know many good people working within it. All the same, the tragic upshot of that system is that it so often exiles precisely those who most need connection and community.

In ABOB, we do what we can to redress that. But it takes a form of courage that can be in short supply in our society: the courage to love and welcome those we might most want to push away.

How do we do that? Many of the answers come at community level – all those structures that ABOB provides, from how we share and listen to how we address tension and conflict. But at a personal level, the key for me has been to acknowledge that every time I want to exile someone else, it is because there is an equivalent part of me that I have exiled. I cannot open my heart to you because you represent something beyond the pale, and so instead, I must get you out of my sight.

SEEING THE SELF IN THE OTHER

Outward expression of anger and aggression was never my thing. To my mind, that was the sin of the boys who would mug me or hassle me on my way home as a skinny teen growing up

in London. But ABOB has helped me to build a relationship with my anger, and to provide a safe place for it to be expressed so that it doesn't do its damage inwards. In the process, I noticed that I gradually found it easier to be around aggressive men, and to acknowledge the pain and sensitivity beneath the behaviours I had previously dismissed with such glib superiority. Fortunately, it's not a skill I have to draw on very often.

A few weeks ago, while holding a circle, Tyler showed up for the first time in months with a different apology – he's found work and has been busy on Wednesday evenings. When one of the newer lads quietly shared that he was feeling overwhelmed with anger and despair and didn't know what to do, it was Tyler who led the way, offering compassion and practical support, hand on shoulder as he took him outside to vent and cool off. This is the work, indeed. ●



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● **abandofbrothers** is a charity run by men who are mainly volunteers, based in 12 communities around England. They support young men aged 18-25 who have been in the criminal justice system or are at risk of going down that path, via mentoring, rites of passage and lifelong community. ABOB are always keen for new mentors and new referrals of young men – to find out where your nearest circle is, visit: ● abandofbrothers.org.uk